(3) Traditional Political Administration

642 The "middle class" non-military Nayars, the
565 Nayar servant castes of menials, all the lower polluting castes, and the serfs, were excluded from the administrative system of the kingdom. Above these castes, the "good" castes formed two hierarchies, the one concerned with the public ritual of the state, and the other with secular administration. The first hierarchy comprised Nambudiris and temple servants; the second, royalty, chiefs and Nayar retainers. Nambudiris were largely outside the legal system of the kingdom; temple servants, though subject to it, took no part in its administration. Political organization was in the hands of the Nayars, their chiefs, and their royal lineage.

643 While responsible for maintaining traditional
701 unwritten law and custom (mamool) among the
631 several castes, the kings were concerned chiefly with amassing soldiers for their armies. Though in each kingdom the royal lineage owned the land in many villages as its private estate, its strength was estimated not in territory but in numbers of Nayar soldiers. Each nad and each desam was classified according to the number of Nayar men it could customarily muster for war; records[31]of these were kept by the
702 Nayar clerks of the palaces. The chief duty of each naduvari was to assemble regularly the soldiers of his nad for military exercises, and in time of war to lead them to battle with the king himself at their head. Within the nad military training was organized on a village basis, sometimes by the Nayar desavari, or, in those villages without a Nayar headman, by a Nayar

702 military leader (Asan) appointed by the chief.
[857] Each desam had its gymnasium (kalari) into which all retainer-Nayar boys were inducted at the age of seven. Their training in gymnastics and swordsmanship lasted nine years, after which they received their arms at the hand of the king
701 and were accorded the title of Nayar. After this age every able-bodied Nayar man was perpetually in military training until he reached the age of retirement or until he was obliged to succeed to the headship of his matrilineal property-group
[541] and retire to manage its lands. In peacetime, mock fights were organized between Nayars of adjacent villages or of adjacent nads, and jousting was conducted at the court for the entertain-
726 ment of the royal family. In war, the Nayars
[714] fought naked: their arms were the sword, bow, lance and the bow and arrow, though gunpowder was also used, at least by the more important Rajas. Battles between enemy kingdoms appear to have been stylized. Not more than 10,000 men were commonly brought into the field at one time, and severe loss of life was prevented by the employment of Nambudiri emissaries who, if fighting became intense, entered the battle field and arbitrated between its leaders. [32] If however the king or a chief were slain, his subjects must fight to the death until their honour was avenged by the slaughter of a corresponding
721 leader on the enemy side. The aim of such battles appears to have been solely to gain control over the military power of nads of adjacent kingdoms, together with certain payments of tribute by conquered chieftains, and also to gain

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European trade shook the foundations of the caste system in other ways. Ports grew larger, and within them European merchants employed Christian converts, artisans, and runaway serfs. Near the ports, serfs sometimes became slaves, being torn from their ancestral lands and sold or hired for cash.

Nevertheless, until the introduction of steam power in the second half of the nineteenth century, the technology and over-all economy of Kerala did not change very radically. Trade was still limited to surplus crops, luxury goods, and metals. Inland villages remained largely self-sufficient, with the lower castes excluded from cash transactions. Upward mobility was virtually confined to Muslims, Christians, and the Hindu aristocrats above the rank of Nayar retainers. It seems to have been this lack of basic change in the technology which allowed the persistence of a strict, hereditary rank order in villages and, within each homogeneous local caste group, of kinship as the main organizing principle.

War and Law

The traditional period was one of perpetual wars between adjacent kingdoms, interrupted only in the rainy seasons. A royal lineage's strength lay in its monopoly of gunpowder, coinage, and customs dues, its ability to use foreign and Muslim ships for naval warfare, and its control of the royal domains both as a source of produce and of Nayar retainers as soldiers. Through its superior wealth and military power a royal lineage could force feudatory princes and vassal nobles to muster soldiers throughout the kingdom in periods of large-scale war. Each district and each village was classified according to the number of Nayar soldiers it could customarily muster for war. In the Zamorin's kingdom the strength of royal feudatories varied between 18,000 and 1,000 Nayars; of Nayar chiefs, between 5,000 and 100; of village headmen, between about 100 and 25 (Ayyar, 1938: 278). Records of the muster of each feudatory were kept by the Nayar clerks of the palace. The primary duty of each chief was to assemble regularly the soldiers of his district for military exercises at the capital, and in time of war to lead them to battle, with the king himself at their head. Within the district military training was organized on a village basis. This might be done by a Nayar village headman, by the chief himself, or, in Brahman villages, by a Nayar military leader (Asan) who acted for the chief or the king. All Nayar boys of the retainer, village headmen, and chiefly and royal

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Central Kerala Nayar

castes seem to have received a military training, although some, especially of the Agattu Charna caste, later became clerks (Dames, 1921: 18–19; A. Gray, 1887, I: 412–413).

The Nayars' traditional arms were the sword, shield, lance, and the bow and arrow, although gunpowder came into increasing use after the Portuguese arrived. Before 1500 battles were highly stylized (cf. C. A. Menon, 1911: 56; Ayyar, 1938: 118, 171). Not more than 10,000 were commonly brought into the field at one time. Severe loss of life was prevented by the employment of Brahman emissaries who, if fighting became intense, might enter the field and arbitrate between the leaders. If, however, the king or a chief were slain, his personal vassals had to fight to the death or until their honor was avenged by the slaughter of a corresponding leader on the enemy side (Logan, 1951, I: 138).

Later, with the introduction of cannon and fortresses by the Europeans, battles became more frequent and devastating. The Zamorin mustered a total force of between 50,000 and 60,000 at various times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against the ruler of Cochin (Ayyar, 1938: 169, 182). The kings had to rely increasingly on paying their soldiers in cash rather than on sporadic feudal levies. Permanent conquest and the control of rich lands also became a more urgent aim of the kings as the overseas trade expanded. But the Nayar techniques of fighting and their code of honor persisted until British times.

Within each kingdom, law was administered at several levels. Each local caste group had its own periodic assembly of household heads to judge crimes (which were also sins) against the caste's religious laws. These included wrongful interdining and sexual relations with members of other castes. The chief punishments were fines for the upkeep of the caste shrine and temporary ostracism. Grave offenders were excommunicated with the consent of the chief. They then became the property of either king or chief and were sold as slaves to foreign traders. In the larger castes such as Tiyyars or Pulayas the local caste group was often contained within the village. The smaller castes of village servants each had their own assemblies extending over a group of adjacent villages.

Among retainer Nayars the local caste group might comprise the Nayars of one caste within one village, within a section of a large village, or within a group of two to four adjacent small villages. This area was called a *tara* in the Calicut kingdom and a *kara* in Cochin; we shall call it a neighborhood. Its assembly was called a *tara-kūttam*

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individual basis, but this money seems only to have sufficed for their food and other necessities while on the march or on service in towns. When they were at home in their villages their kāranavan assumed responsibility for each man's customary gifts to his wives in other households.

Within his own household the kāranavan personally allocated their subsistence to its members. Every few weeks he transferred quantities of unhusked rice, vegetables, and other stores from the granary to storerooms inside the house. They were then usually taken over by the eldest woman, who kept keys to the storerooms and chests and allocated daily supplies to the kitchen. In property groups with more than one homestead the kāranavan delivered quantities of paddy, salt, and coconut oil twice annually to each house according to the number of its members. Each house sent a person daily to the ancestral house to bring fresh vegetables, milk, buttermilk, and other perishable foods. In all taravāds the kāranavan controlled purchases from the town. Twice a year—at New Year and at the harvest festival—he distributed clothing to both male and female members.

Virtuous kāranavans were those who managed the daily affairs of the taravād with thrift, justice, and meticulous care, but who, through judicious planning, were able to lavish grand feasts upon caste members, tenants, village servants, and serfs at the major life-crisis rites. An aged kāranavan would enumerate with satisfaction the various feasts at funerals, tāli rites, and first-menstruation ceremonies which he had satisfactorily conducted. Each of the servant castes contributed appropriate goods or services in advance of these feasts, and each Nayar house reciprocated the hospitality when its own life-crisis rites came round. Besides reaffirming in a ceremonial manner the different types of ties between Nayars and between Nayars and the lower castes, the life-crisis ceremonies seem to have stimulated production and provided suitable foci for acts of economic redistribution and reciprocity.

The amounts of time spent by junior men of the taravād on different activities are no longer clearly known. We know however that at the age of seven a boy was inducted into military training in the village gymnasium; this training persists in a few villages, and includes fencing, wrestling, rigorous exercise, and very strenuous massage. Traditionally, Nayars also learned archery from a special caste of village servants (Vil Kurups). For a part of their time they attended a village school run by yet another caste of schoolteachers (Eruttacchans); almost all adult Nayar men and most women were literate

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613 in Malayalam and some became famous poets during the sixteenth
868 and later centuries. A Nayar received his arms from his feudal lord
[212] —a village headman, a district chief, or a prince—at the age of six-
teen. From this time until, perhaps, late middle age, he seems to have
[702] spent periods of each year away from his village attending military
[726] exercises in the larger towns or fighting in the continual wars against the North Malabar chiefdoms, Walluvanad, or Palghat, or between Cochin and Calicut themselves. Evidently Nayars also spent long periods in their villages, at least in the monsoon seasons, for they policed the villages, arranged village festivals, were bailiffs on the landlord's domain, and paid regular visits to local wives. Nayar youths were also obliged to attend with their seniors and fulfill ceremonial obligations
[182] at the life-crisis rites of the landlord family. The rites were of course
[439] conducted in a grand manner and served as a focus for the collection and redistribution of perishable goods throughout the village.

613 Nayar youths also did some cultivation of vegetables and spices in
868 the gardens of their taravāds. Every youth received a rigorous train-
241 ing in cultivation methods, land management, the keeping of accounts, and the construction of houses, either directly from his kāranavan or, more usually, from the brothers of his own mother. However, there was no clear-cut allocation of differential authority and economic roles among the junior men of a taravād in this area. This was evidently not necessary because the bulk of the work was done by tenants and serfs, whose management could be most easily controlled by a single experienced man. It was enough that a young Nayar should learn *how* to manage and to cultivate so that he might one day replace his kāranavan. Their military duties were obviously the important ones for junior
[701] Nayars. It is unfortunate that we know next to nothing about how they were organized in the army, or even if they fought in lineage groups under the leadership of their mothers' brothers. All we know is that they were for the most part recruited in lineages, with the members of one lineage serving the same feudal lord.

613 The division of labor between the sexes was less rigid than in most
462 Hindu castes, but was well demarcated in daily life. Girls played with boys, attended the village school, and even received training in the
[588] gymnasium, until they underwent the tāli rite, usually at about the age of eleven. After this they were segregated from the men of their lineage and concentrated their time on domestic tasks. For most purposes the group of matrilineally related women formed a single work unit under the informal authority of the oldest (or oldest competent) woman. She gave out produce for cooking and allotted to each woman